

[Rev. Elias Skipitares]

26092

August 22, 1939.

Rev. Elias Skipitares,

Minister,

Eastern [Hollonis?] Orthodox

Community Church,

"The Revelation of

St. John Divine"

Corner Laura and Union

Streets,

Jacksonville, Florida.

Rose Shepherd, Writer.

REV. ELIAS SKIPITARES, (GREEK)

MINISTER,

Greek church, "The Revelation of St. John Divine"

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Rev. Skipitares had made an appointment to be at the office at 9 a. m., and promptly on the dot he was at the head of the stairs.

Rev. Skipitares is a large man, with heavy [slock?] black hair, deep-set gray eyes, with a handsome full-growth beard. His skin is fine-grained and smooth, with a slight olive tinge. Dressed in his [alpasa?] suit, with long flowing coat, his bishop's collar, plain shirt, and no jewelry, he could not be mistaken for any other than a minister of his denomination.

He is a man of pleasing personality, with friendly gestures and a ready smile; seemingly afraid of being thought unobliging, he was more than willing to co-operate in giving any information.

"I suffer greatly from the heat," he said. After being seated comfortably in the hall by an open door with the cool 2 breezes wafting through, he spoke most interestingly of his early life in Greece, his journey as a young man to the United States, and his life year by year afterwards.

"I am now fifty-two years of age," he said. "I was born in 1887, in Tripolis, the capital of the State of [Areadiad]?, in the Peliopenesius of Greece." He arrived at his age from rapidly subtracting the years that had elapsed since the World War by referring to his discharge papers from the American forces which he removed from an inside coat pocket.

"You know, in those early days they did not keep birth records in my country. It is only since the war that they have established the means of recording births for a permanent record.

"I had several brothers and sisters, but they are all dead now, except one brother and one sister living in the old home town.

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"It was decided early that I should be a priest. There were no schools in the little village where we lived, so my father hired a private teacher and I started studying when I was only six years old.

"I went right on studying until I was ten. Then I was taken into Tripolis, a city of about 16,000 people, where I passed successfully the examination that admitted me to the high school.

"I had a cousin in San Francisco California, and a nephew in Chicago, Illinois. In 1907 I decided to come to the United States. I have a cousin, in fact, several [relatives?] in Alexandria, Egypt, but we talk things over, and my parents decide things better for me in America. They did not object to my leaving home — it was just a question as to where I have the best future.

"A nephew came with me from Tripolis. I was twenty and he was a few years younger.

"We landed in New York City, staying overnight at the Immigration Office at Ellis Island. Late in the afternoon of the next day we take the night [boat?] into New York, and are put on a train for the west, in care of the conductor, bound for San Francisco.

"The next day we arrive in Cincinnati, Ohio, and the second day in St. Louis, Missouri. We have to wait here two hours for the train to the West. We were very [hungry?], as we did not like the American stuff they served us on the train. They gave us bologna, but we would not touch it, and they charged a dollar for it, too.

"We took a walk outside the big Union Station in St. Louis and I spied a Greek newspaper boy. I called him, so glad to see one of my own countrymen, and he directed us to a Greek restaurant nearby.

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"We hardly started good, when the conductor who was supposed to look after us, spied us, calling to a policeman that we were running away, and back we went into the dingy station without a bite to eat.

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"When the time was up, we were put aboard the train again. The next step was Denver, Colorado. We had to wait here three hours.

"We were famished by this time, so we watched our chances, eluded the watchful conductor, and found a Greek restaurant where we ate everything on the bill of fare. This was our first full meal since leaving Ellis Island, three days before.

We went on to Cheyenne, Wyoming, where we were held up twenty-four hours on account of a wreck. A policeman watched us here, so we had no chance to leave the station. When night came, another took his place. It was getting pretty cold, so we doubled our blankets and rolled up to sleep on the benches.

"The next morning, while the policemen were changing watch, we were looking out the window and saw some schoolboys. We must have looked funny to them, there was an Italian boy had joined up with us, and the first thing I knew one of them had thrown a rock through the window and hit me on the forehead. It cutta pretty deep place and started to bleed. I had a pocketknife with a long blade I had brought with me from the homeland. I took it from my pocket, opened it and started out of the door after the boy who had thrown the rock. I chased him for a block or so, when I ran plank into a policeman. He interfered, let the boy get away, and made me put the knife back in my pocket and his myself back to the station.

"Later on when our watchman was temporarily off duty, we left the station again and located a bar, where we ordered 5 some beer. We placed our money on the counter, but they would not let us have the beer, because we were young fellows. (Minors).

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"I do not know if an officer was called, but about this time a policeman grabbed us, and took us back to the station.

We watched our chances and ran out again, going into a big building like some sort of a club, where we wrote letters to the folks back home and to our cousin in San Francisco. When we came out, we bumped right into a policeman — I never have seen so many officers, they seemed to be everywhere. We ran back, darting in and out, when he came in the front door, we went out the back, finally losing him.

"Well, the [train?] was cleared of the wreck, and late in the day we were off again, this time reaching Salt Lake City.

"We thought we like he place, so we decide to stay there. The mosquitoes were so much we could hardly walk around. We had nets over our faces, but still they bite and bite.

"I look for work, and finally found a man who seemed kind and he sent me to school for six months. Then I get work in a concrete factory at \$2.50 a day, working eight hours. I stood it for two months, but the work was very hard, so I give it up and start a milk station.

"There was a Greek settlement here, and I do very well, as my people drink a great deal of milk. For the morning mean they are each supposed to drink a quart. Milk was cheap 6 out there. I bought it for nine cents a gallon and sell it at five cents a quart. For eggs I pay ten cents a dozen, chickens 25 cents each, and lamb, seven cents a pound. There was a saloon close at hand, and there we could get beer at twenty-five cents a bucket. In those days, we all worked hard, and ate heavy, and the beer was a great help."

In answer to a direct question, he said: "Yes, we have beer in Greece, very fine beer, made with barley, but it is quite expensive. Only the rich can [afford?] it, and people come to the beer gardens and drink in the evening — nothing else — like you here eat icecream.

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“Parents in the old country do not mind their young men drinking beer, it is all moderate, and they are most concerned, the father especially, as to the future of their children, and they see always that they study and do not be much idle.”

He resumed his story: “I sell my milk stand and we move on to Missoula, Montana. Here I first contact the union. It was in this town that the first union for dishwashers, waiters, and other restaurant help, was put in operation. A man was hung in a tree for disobeying rules.

“Here I work for the railroad — the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul. It was a hard winter, much snow and sleet, and the trains were stalled everywhere. This was in 1908. I remember one time the snow plow started out and cleared away the snow thirteen feet deep.

“On May 15, 1908, there was a three-foot snow in Montana, and after this, the tracks were cleaned and the first train — passenger train — went through to Chicago.

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“We move on that summer to Idaho, a small place called Watrous where the time is changed. There is a long tunnel — on the west of this tunnel where the train comes through, is Western time, and at the east end of the tunnel is Central Standard Time.

“We kept on going west and finally landed in Spokane, Washington. This is the first time I see women wearing overalls. They were picking strawberries. This was in 1908.

“In Spokane I get the idea to enlist in the United States Army. I went three different times to the recruiting office, and each time I go there is nobody there — only a sign say to come back at some later hour, mentioned on the card on the door. I get discouraged after the third time, and say to myself — ““Three times is enough. I do not go any more.””

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"I took a job of construction work at Mansfield, Washington. It is in the desert country, and everybody who has the contract gets discouraged and gives it up. Nobody [can?] completes the work, and the job is hanging fire.

"Well, I took the contract, brought some of my people up there in wagons, and we start the work, but it is impossible to complete it. It took President Roosevelt to finish this job — the famous [Coulee?] Dam.

"We work at most anything, because when you are a stranger in a strange land you have to look out for the dollar.

"We keep on until we get to Spokane, Washington, and got a 8 job with a new power company , at Huntington, [Washington?] the Snake River. They were building a big dam to furnish power to the states of Idaho, Washington, and Oregon — a big electric plant to supply power from the Snake River. This was desert country, too. Hardly anybody stayed. But I held my job and stayed right there until the last concrete was poured. It looked like a beautiful piece of work, but in 1910 came a big flood and washing everything away.

"There were two companies that handled this job: the first, Rogers and Co., which went bust, and the other, William White Company, of New York City. They put up ten million dollars, finishing the job. But I left before the flood.

"I went back to Spokane, Washington and took a job with Norfleet Construction Company, then I took up a homestead of three hundred and twenty acres at Oraville — on the border between Washington, in the United States, and Canada on the north. After a year or so, I got some grainger land — 320 acres — purchasing some horses and cattle. I was there was 1911 to 1914. I decided to stay right on, [as] it took some time to prove up on a claim.

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"In 1971 the war broke and I enlisted in the United States service. About seventy-five boys enlisted in September 1917 at Oraville, being sent from there to Camp Lewis, about fifteen miles outside of Tacoma, Washington. It was a beautiful camp.

"Fifteen days later, President Wilson sent me my 9 exemption papers, on account of being a farmer. But I refused to go back. I was assigned to the Ordnance Department, I had charge of a squad of fifteen men, and each day we inspected five thousand rifles — grease and everything.

"When the Armistice was signed in 1918, I was transferred to Erie, Ohio, to a training ground where they shot big guns into the lake — Lake Erie.

"Then I went back to the farm.

"Not so long afterwards, Uncle Sam sent me to a vocational training school, a part of the Washington State University, at Seattle, Washington, where I studied to be a doctor. Here I received my final naturalization papers from the government at Washington, D. C.

"When I was still at the University of Washington, I was receiving private instruction in Phrenology from Mrs. R. S. Fuller, wife of Prof. Fuller, a famous phrenologist, of New York City. After Prof. Fuller died, Mrs. [Roy?] S. Fuller, his widow, married a Greek, named Chumas, and went to California, where she was known as Mrs. Fuller-[Chumas?].

"Mrs. Fuller had a young lady pupil, also studying phrenology, and she afterwards became my wife.

"I would not take anything for my knowledge of this great subject, old as the hills, but most, most useful. I use it all the time, and it helps me to decide many [problems?] that come up in my work as a minister.

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"The young lady and I went to Salt Lake City first, where we opened an office, she talking to and teaching the women, I, the men.

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"We went to Salt Lake City, opening offices there, and later in San Francisco, where [we?] were married. We also opened an office in Los Angeles. The Bishop of the Orthodox Greek Church came to San Francisco on his first visit, and I went up from Los Angeles to meet him. I showed him my papers and my past records, talked with him as to what I had in mind, and he ordained me as a priest. The service took place at Ghila, Nevada. For six months I traveled over the west

"One of these trips was through the desert in Nevada, so hot that the stones were like furnaces, and we had to travel at night. One day we started out from Arena, Nevada, and traveled ninety-nine miles, when we ran out of gas two miles from the nearest town, Goldfield, Nevada. The oil station was behind a knoll, so I left the Bishop in the car and walked the two hot miles, having a hard time to locate the little village, almost hidden behind a hill."

Asked about the exchange in use then in the [west?], Rev. Skipitares said: "There was no silver and no currency, just five, ten, and twenty-dollar gold pieces."

Continuing his story: "I took my post as a priest of the Greek Church in Los Angeles, and was there for two years, when I was transferred to Phoenix, Arizona. I was the first priest to hold services there, and a put up a nice little church. There were a good many Greeks in the community, being out there to get relief from tuberculosis. I stayed there during 1931 and 1932, having only seven converts in all the territory of Arizona, which included large towns like [Negalse?] and Flaggstaff, also [Bisbee?].

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I covered the whole state in my Model-T Ford. One time when we were in the mountains, the old thing balked, and my wife had to get out and push the car. It was so hot on those

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travels that I carried two sacks of water, one on each running board — the water would boil in the tank, and I had always to be prepared. During a long trip, both sacks of water would be consumed.

“Then I went to Bakersfield, California, and built another church. There are many sheep herders and farmers in that section, where produce is mostly wholesaled. Fine honey-dew melons are raised in that part of California, and quantities of grapes. The climate there is like that of Greece. Everybody worked, and worked hard.

“The only lazy people I find are in the south. Everybody has servants. I do not mean particularly, Florida, but North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. The people buy everything. When fruit is plentiful in the market, they do not can and preserve it for later use, but buy, buy, all the time. My explanation of this is that the English people were first to settle in the South and they had plenty of money, so there was no reason for them to economize. Then the colored people were brought into the picture, then slaves, and they had them to care for and to feed, so why not let them do all the work? In the West, in the North, and the East, the housewives can peaches, pears, grapes, tomatoes, and other fruits and vegetables, and there is always plenty and a great variety for the children to eat.”

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Returning to his work as a minister, Mr. Skipitares continued:

“From California I went to Massachusetts, fifteen miles from the city of Worcester, where the Bishop thought / there was a good field for my work. The people in that section were factory workers, but the factories were closed, and everybody was hard pressed for money. The WPA had taken over one mill which was placed in operation on a part time basis. Each Saturday I would go to the Welfare Department and they would give me bacon, [eggs?], rice, cheese, vegetables, and sometimes meat, which on Sunday I would have my secretary distribute share and share alike to my congregation. The church was

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\$35,000 in debt, having a membership of only twenty-five families, yet I started out and in thirteen months, I had all debts paid. I traveled over the entire New England States — Rhode Island, Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont and New Hampshire. The entire amount was donated, starting with five dollars, and on up, as could be afforded.

“Next I was sent to Banger, Maine, but the altitude was too high for me there, and I was transferred to Raleigh, North Carolina, where I held services in a little hall. The people there are poor, with no money to build a church. There I stayed two years, coming to Jacksonville in 1938.

“The Greeks of New England are probably the most prosperous of any in the United States, when the factories are in full operation, as there is plenty of work, and they are paid well. When the factories are closed, I do not know how they manage.

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[“I?”] do not like Florida — the climate, I mean — it is too hot here. I have been in the deserts of the west, where it was so hot I could not travel in the daytime, but would drive all night, yet I never suffered with the heat as much as I do here. I have moved to the beach road near the ocean, but it is hot; now I have a house in town, which is supposed to be cool, yet it is hot. I find my people complain a great deal of headaches here, caused by the hot sun.”

Referring to a former interview where dreams were discussed, Mr. Skipitares said: “Yes, I believe in dreams. But the interpretation is partly a gift. You remember Joseph was in prison, but God gave him the [?] gift/ to interpret the dream.

“As to fasting, that is an old as the world. Jesus was a human being, yet he fasted, and kept his health.

“When I was a student of Mrs. Roy Puller-Chumas, taking phrenology, I was also studying the effect of electricity as a means of curing disease, and the use of the natural electric

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currents of life from the sun. For instance, infantile paralysis when properly treated is not fatal, nor does it leave one crippled, in intelligently handled.

“One man in Spokane, Washington, came under my care, for treatment of sleeping sickness. I had him up and around, but his wife called the doctors who gave him shots of arsenic, which killed him.

“This work I do not get here, but from the Universities in Greece’

(To be continued)